



## Save The River

Upper St. Lawrence **RIVERKEEPER**<sup>®</sup>

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## WHITE PAPER

### Save The River Policy Statement on Opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway Shipping Season

#### Background

For almost 30 years, Save The River has represented Upper St. Lawrence River communities in efforts to protect the River. Founded in 1978 by a group of citizens opposed to winter navigation on the St. Lawrence Seaway, the issue of shipping in winter months remains one of pivotal importance to our members.

Over the years, the Seaway's navigation season has lengthened incrementally, and spring ice breaking has become common practice as the opening date, as set by the St Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation (SLSDC) and the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation (SLSMC), has crept from early April to late March. Save The River opposes a longer shipping season because of the dangers posed to the delicate ecosystem of the River, and seeks to promote an opening policy that will adequately protect this resource which is of such importance, both ecologically and economically, to our membership and our communities.

#### Criteria for Opening the Seaway Season

Save The River offers the following criteria to be used to set the opening of the shipping season on the St. Lawrence Seaway.

##### 1) Two-Inches of Ice or Less on the River and its Embayments

The opening of the Seaway should not take place until conditions along the River are such that there are only *two inches of ice or less* on the River and its embayments. In these conditions, no icebreaking should be needed on the River to allow for ship passage.

In conditions where the shipping channel is clear but thick ice remains in bays, vessel passages and resulting ship wakes can cause damage to shoreline habitats. Ship generated wave energy can result in premature ice break up and cause ice scouring damage in wetland habitats adjacent to the shipping channel. These wetland areas are critical habitat and spawning areas for fish and other wildlife. Premature ice break-up can also result in physical damage to shoreline structures that would not have occurred under natural conditions.<sup>1</sup> Only opening the Seaway when the River and embayments have two inches of ice or less will limit this damage.

Additionally, the ice conditions described above have significant wildlife habitat value. Creation of open water areas during ice-breaking activities can delay the migration of some bird species. Ice breaking for winter navigation can also disrupt the movement of large mammals, such as deer and foxes, across the ice and disrupt the feeding by many over-wintering bird species, such as bald eagles,

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<sup>1</sup> These impacts were identified in the Environmental Assessment of the FY 1979 Winter Navigation Demonstration on the St. Lawrence River prepared by the NYS DEC in conjunction with SUNY ESF.

ducks, and mergansers, that rely on naturally occurring open water-ice edges. Also, ship passage during the winter causes birds to fly more often and over greater distances decreasing their energy reserves.

## **2) Availability of Spill Response Assets**

Spill response assets must be accessible and usable when the Seaway opens. The shipping season should not open until access to the River is available from the boat ramps listed in the US Coast Guard's Area Contingency Plan and all other spill response assets are available. When the River is frozen, boats, boom and other response assets cannot be deployed and, as a result, spill response plans are not feasible. Until River bays are thawed, most boat ramps are frozen out and therefore not usable. And, early in the shipping season many boats for towing boom are winterized and not available.

## **3) Hazardous Materials Cargo**

Absolutely no hazardous materials should be transported on the Seaway until ice is completely gone from the River because of the limitations of responding to a spill or accident in ice conditions. Any spill, whether large or small, could devastate birds, fish, and other wildlife, recreational activities, property, and economic livelihoods. When spilled in water, oil and many chemicals may spread miles in a short period of time. In icy conditions, these impacts will be more severe due to the difficulty of timely and effective response.

## **4) Placement of Lighted Navigational Aids**

All lighted navigational aids should be in place prior to Seaway opening. Despite technological advances such as electronic charts, it is widely agreed that lighted navigational aides are an essential component of safe navigation. For this reason, ships should never be allowed to transit the Seaway before these aides are in place.

## **5) Consultation with NY Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)**

Save The River strongly encourages the SLSDC and SLSMC to consult with the NY DEC when selecting an opening date. NY DEC is the agency whose holds a lead responsibility in protecting the ecology of the River, and therefore has a unique perspective that prioritizes the River's ecological health. STR feels that the nature of the opening date decision has such important implications on the area's natural features that the inclusion of the State's resource agency is appropriate and essential for good decision making.

## **Summary**

While Save The River understands the need to provide shippers with an opening date, STR urges the SLSDC and SLSMC to continually re-assess the opening date as it approaches. The shipping season should only commence once actual conditions on the River meet the criteria defined above. Save The River feels strongly that a Seaway opening policy that meets the above criteria would better protect the vital resource that is the St. Lawrence River while still meeting the goals and needs of the maritime industry.

*March 2007*